Parliamentary Assembly
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COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Resolution 1419 (2005)[1]

Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs)

Parliamentary Assembly

1. As the production and use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) increases worldwide, the Parliamentary Assembly recognises that clear political rules which pay due regard to the precautionary principle are needed in order to ensure that new and traditional agricultural production methods are able to co-exist in the member states. The purpose of these rules must be to safeguard in the long term the ecological and economic fundamentals of human life and the biodiversity of our living environment.

2. The Assembly notes that biotechnological research and applications in the sphere of agriculture have contributed considerably to new knowledge about plants and animals. Major improvements have been achieved in breeding methods. However, a distinction has to be made between biotechnological methods in general and the specific method of gene transfer enabling scientists to produce GMOs.

3. It also notes that the production and use of GMOs is the subject of extreme controversy in Europe and that there is as yet no reliable information concerning their medium- and long-term environmental effects.

4. Huge investments have been poured into genetic applications. In addition to the large number of plant varieties approved worldwide, transgenic fish and genetically modified micro-organisms are about to enter the market.

5. According to GMO producers, the expected benefits range from the improvement of agronomic characteristics and lowering of production costs, with an associated increase in profits, to improved quality foods. Research is also taking place into the biological elimination of contaminants. Those new technologies should help to better meet the needs of developing countries.

6. The Assembly believes that although green biotechnology offers a broad spectrum of potential benefits, many risks – for example horizontal gene transfer – have not been sufficiently evaluated and should continue to be studied. While the health risks associated with current GMOs can be regarded as slight, provided that safety controls prove effective, future developments with modified output characteristics will entail new and different risks that will have to be assessed on an individual basis.

7. Long-term effects on biodiversity are difficult to estimate, particularly as there is no generally recognised definition of "ecological damage". The Assembly emphasises that there are currently no uniform standards for the assessment of mandatory monitoring of crops in cultivation. Long-term monitoring is obligatory to allow the ecological effects of GMOs to be assessed.

8. Too little attention has been paid to date to the breeding of transgenic animals and genetically modified micro-organisms. Experiments with transgenic domestic animals have been under way for many decades. The objectives are almost the same as those of conventional breeding methods : increasing productivity, particularly in the sphere of agriculture.

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1. Assembly debate on 26 January 2005 (5th Sitting) (see Doc. 10380, report of the Committee on the Environment, Agriculture and Local and Regional Affairs, rapporteur : Mr Wodarg ; and Doc. 10406, opinion of the Committee on Culture, Science and Education, rapporteur : Ms Fernández de Capel). Text adopted by the Assembly on 26 January 2005 (5th Sitting).

9. In addition to the health risks to humans (allergies, nutritional effects, zoonoses) which so far have hardly been examined, biotechnological modifications to domestic animals involve serious health effects for the animals themselves. The question arises as to whether it is ethically justifiable to develop transgenic animals for economic reasons.

10. The Assembly considers that besides the economic, social and ethical consequences, the ecological consequences and a possible further reduction in numbers of locally endangered species of domestic animals must be taken into account.

11. The Assembly is aware that a great variety of political strategies for dealing with GMOs have been seen internationally. Whereas in the USA neither separation of the flow of goods nor mandatory labelling has been set up and, in Brazil and Mexico, repeated incidents of contamination of native species have been detected, the European Union has decided to err on the side of caution in its policy and to allow producers and consumers permanent freedom of choice (strict approval process, labelling, coexistence). The GMO-free criterion has become a decisive quality criterion for export and import.

12. Several Council of Europe member states want stricter GMO regulations than those in force in the European Union as there are concerns that a creeping and uncontrollable spread of GMOs is taking place via countries in central and eastern Europe. Any action intended to undermine an explicit decision against the release of GMOs by the mere accomplishment of facts must be clearly rejected. Any illegal action designed to destroy the plants on field trials must also be rejected.

13. Since there has been a de facto moratorium for the authorisation of GMOs since 1998, the European Union wishes to set up a uniform regulation for handling GMOs in the member states, in line with the negative attitude of consumers, but also to further extend the innovative potential of biotechnology and to create reliable conditions for trade in GMOs approved in the EU. Within the EU, from April 2004, human foodstuffs and animal feeds, the production of which involves the use of biotechnological processes, must be labelled even if the products themselves no longer contain GMOs (transition from product labelling to process labelling). The labelling of genetically modified animal feedstuffs is mandatory, though not the labelling of meat, milk and eggs from animals fed with genetically modified feed.

14. The Assembly considers that the major reservations expressed by consumers are not only attributable to the fact that new products do not show any benefit. The loss of consumer confidence, particularly in the area of food manufacture, is due to a variety of causes and should be taken very seriously by producers, retailers and politicians irrespective of possible irrational factors. On the one hand, one must accept that individuals have different and differentiated perceptions of risk. On the other, it must be appreciated that the use and promotion of certain technologies do not take place in isolation but are bound up with more complex political decisions on matters such as the direction of agriculture policy or the use of public resources.

15. It states that to date it has been apparent that the use of gene technology in the agricultural sphere is a continuation of intensive farming, based on increasing yields with the help of chemicals. Relieving pressures on the environment by reducing the use of agrochemicals has proved not to have lasting benefits as resistance to those substances has developed. Land management in accordance with ecological principles offers an alternative to traditional practice which ought not to be jeopardised by an over-hasty plunge into widespread commercial cultivation of GMOs.

16. The Assembly believes that against a non-quantifiable risk involved in the release of genetically modified organisms there stands a so far unproven advantage for the consumer. Ethical aspects such as animal protection, the quite considerable supervisory and control requirements of long-term monitoring of the environmental effects, conformity with threshold values and, in future, the identification of potential health implications and the resulting costs, as well as the ensuing restrictions on existing freedoms to grow whatever crops one wishes, suggest that the social debate should continue and the research agenda should be extended to include the concept of sustainability.

17. It states that the present world trade situation should be regarded in terms of the demands of sustainable economic policy. The system of patents which protects intellectual property, for example, does not ensure a fair balance between the rich countries and the poorer ones. Patent law is increasingly proving a stratagem for the acquisition of quasi-proprietary rights to agricultural resources. Patents on biological material intensify and consolidate dependencies and bring with them the danger of monopolies and merciless cut-throat competition to the disadvantage of farming structures and farmers. The social consequences of such economic promotion may create or aggravate serious problems of poverty.

18. The Assembly considers that the transgenic varieties developed to date are not suitable for growing in the developing countries for which technology transfer, and not just the opening up of new market outlets, is vital. World hunger is the result of unfair distribution and the effective fight against poverty must start with trade structures and participation rights.

19. Consequently the Assembly recommends that governments of member states, when defining their policies on GMOs :

take into account four general principles :

a. respecting the freedom of choice for consumers and producers: maintaining simple access to GMO-free foods is the central objective of GMO regulation. This implies that the viability of an agriculture without GMOs can be safeguarded in the long term. In contrast to other forms of traditional agriculture, regional organic farming cannot be safeguarded by threshold values above the limit of technical detection. In any case, consumers of organic products will not accept a tolerance threshold of 0.9% GMOs ;

b. preserving sustainability in agriculture : GMO-free agriculture should be guaranteed in law without ruling out the cultivation of GMO crops and the confined release of GMO for scientific purposes. Organic farming in particular deserves protection because it is the best form of agriculture in terms of ecological sustainability, as mentioned in the Assembly's Recommendation 1636 (2003) on the development of organic farming ;

c. precaution: given large gaps in scientific knowledge, both in the field of molecular genetics and with regard to ecological consequences, irreversible manipulation of nature and creeping contamination with transgenes should be avoided and the environmental precautionary principle recognised at all times ;

d. objectivity of the scientific debate and public participation: it is in the interests of all concerned to construct a sound scientific base at various levels of safety research, to make it possible for standards and regulations to be redirected, eased or tightened under agreed procedures. Only on the basis of broad social discussion can clear political decisions be taken. Research should also be more open to this debate. A debate involving the whole of society should focus not only on the risks of green genetic engineering but also on the question of whether or not social models, objectives and practical expectations justify the move into green biotechnology on a larger scale ;

bring safety standards relating to the use of GMOs into line with EU legislation as a minimum standard ;

additionally take precautions in view of :

a. labelling of GMOs : the labelling of animal products following the use of genetically modified feedstuffs should be a mandatory requirement. Efforts should be made to develop a consistent approach to process labelling ;

b. labelling of seeds : following the precautionary principle, compulsory labelling of seeds at the limit of technical detection (0.1%) is the most effective means of checking environmental consequences and securing conformity with threshold values for labelling purposes ;

c. liability regime : clear regulations on the questions of liability, together with clear decisions on who is to bear the additional costs incurred in making possible the co-existence of different forms of agriculture. These rules should obey the causal agent principle ;

d. good agricultural practice : regulation of good agricultural practice in terms of production and use of GMOs (minimum distances, public register, etc.) ;

e. GMO-free zones : GMO-free reference areas should be established to fix natural baselines. Regional agreements for GMO-free zones should be possible to safeguard the co-existence of different methods of cultivation and ecologically sensitive areas ;

f. prohibition of the cultivation of GMO crops which contain marker-genes for antibiotic resistance ;

take the following steps in view of the fact that the commercial introduction of transgenic domestic animals is imminent :

a. risk investigations: thorough risk investigation in a number of areas (human health, animal health, ecological effects) is urgent. The use of genetically modified micro-organisms in livestock farming should consider the animal and its life cycle as a whole ;

b. secure fencing systems : under no circumstances should genetically modified livestock be kept in open herds. In order to restrict the risks to the surrounding ecosystem arising from transgenic fish, these should not be kept in cage systems in the open sea ;

c. pharmaceutical products: transgenic plants and animals used for the production of pharmaceutical products should be kept only in enclosed areas. A distinction must be drawn between health-promoting and therapeutic effects.

20. The Assembly recommends that parliaments of member states and the European Parliament ensure that the proposed principles and measures are taken into account in their respective legislations.

21. The Parliamentary Assembly recalls its Recommendation 1425 (1999) on biotechnology and intellectual property and reiterates its request that farmers have the possibility to use their own harvest for reseeding, in order to reduce their dependency on seed producers which are increasingly dominating the market.